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A

HISTORIC SKETCH

OF THE

BULFINCH-STREET SOCIETY:

A Discourse

DELIVERED BY ITS MINISTER,

WILLIAM R. ALGER,

APRIL 21, 1861.

Trans 4496.1
98.592
Dec. 2. 1869.

BOSTON:

PRINTED BY JOHN WILSON AND SON,

22, School Street.

7551.310

A PARISH SERMON.

Ezra vii. 20. — "And whatsoever more shall be needful for the house of thy God, which thou shalt have occasion to bestow, bestow it."

When the first temple, builded by Solomon, had long been in ruins, the subjected people at last obtained permission from their Persian rulers to go up to Jerusalem and rebuild it. The king sent abroad letters commanding his subjects to afford the Jews every facility in accumulating money and materials for their great work; and, whatever deficiency was found, to make it good from the royal treasury. Then broke forth such joy as has rarely swelled the heart of a nation. Their shouts rose, and their tears fell, and they poured out their plate and jewels, and there was no sacrifice they were not willing to make, if so they might see the grandeur of the house of their God restored.

There was something glorious in the enthusiasm of the Jews for their temple, — a sentiment of common devotion lifting their souls out of selfish cares, sweeping them away on its disinterested flood, in proud communion and kindling worship, cultivating at once the sense of nationality and the spirit of religion. Standing before the gates of the temple, contemplating its snowy and golden magnificence, or kneeling within its courts, beneath clouds of incense, every Jew was more a man for his part in that august structure and its ritual. He

thus felt magnified as a member of a compacted people, and sanctified as a chosen servant of the living God.

Ages ago, that regal building went to dust, leaving not one stone upon another: and a greater than Solomon is breathing through the world, "Neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem alone, seeketh the Father acceptable worshippers; but wherever filial spirits bow in homage, or toil in love, there the Parent Spirit is worshipped in truth."

In our country and age, religion is no longer monopolized by a priesthood, nor taken up and administered by a government which can concentrate the energies of a whole people on one central edifice, filled with the wonders of art and the prides of tradition, to captivate the popular imagination, as if in those courts religion were visibly enthroned, and God himself stooped exclusively there. Among us, the public support of religion is a free, republican service, appealing only to the unhampered thought, personal sensibilities, and voluntary contributions, of the individuals who choose to group together for that purpose. Under these circumstances, every society should endeavor to feel towards its own church as the Jew felt towards the beloved Zion clustered over with hallowed associations which struck to the innermost fibres of his experience, and were intertwined with his holiest hopes. To a right-feeling man no other temple can be so solemn and dear as the one in which he has himself been brought up to worship. That is his Zion; and when he strays to foreign lands, however spacious and resplendent their shrines may be, he must feel with aching heart, as the hallowed day returns, that his feet are on the banks of Babel, and his harp hangs sad on the willows. There the venerable forms of his grandparents tottered before him up the aisle to their familiar seat: side by side in the old churchyard they have slept many a long day since. There his mother led him by the hand to the Sunday school, when heaven was in his heart and the world lay sparkling before his eyes: ah! she too, cold and

sunken, lies yonder in the dust. There how often he has seen, borne slowly round by honored hands, the eloquent memorials of his Saviour's dying love! There he first learned to face the awful and splendid problems of sin and death, God, and grace, and eternity. There he has seen many an earnest worshipper bend in prayer, and weep in penitence, and wrestle in resolve, and exult in praise. Perhaps there he stood, in manhood's morning, to receive his bride, while, through the open windows, all the June-birds carolled in the meadows, and the wild-brier flung its scent over the altar. Hard and dry and cold must his nature be, if, wherever fortune bears him, he does not still cry, from the full-swept chords of his soul, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem! let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy."

Brethren and friends, to us who are accustomed to pay our devotions here, this place should be precious, as our chosen Zion. It is the house we have set apart to the special worship of our God. Here we assemble, in the hallowed intervals of the weeks, to throw off our cares in the fellowship of heaven; in faith and love to approach the infinite Father; by penitent confessions and righteous vows, to appropriate the grace brought through Christ; by indulging tender meditations, and feeling the solemn sympathies of humanity, and singing the psalms of the Lord, to counteract the hardening power of the world, and rise, for one little season at least, into the anticipated joys of our immortal inheritance. We have been brought together here by Providence from many scattered places. Each of us may have had an earlier and a dearer Zion than this one: but, now that we belong here, this is our Zion; and it is our duty, so far as we are able, to sustain its foundation with our offerings, to adorn its shrine with our affections, to crowd its courts with our harmonious numbers, and to reflect honor on its name by our good works. It

is for the stirring-up of your minds by way of remembrance, for the animating of your hearts with the generous spirit of devotion which breathes through it, that I have chosen the text, and am now to present for your consideration the local subject and lessons it will immediately suggest. "And whatsoever more shall be needful for the house of thy God, which thou shalt have occasion to bestow, bestow it."

Before the ecclesiastical structure in which we are assembled was erected, there were in this whole quarter of the city, then much more domestic and fixed in its character than now, but two churches for our present seventeen, — the West Church in Lynde Street, and the Baptist Church in Charles Street. The Universalist Church in Hanover Street was at that time overflowing. A portion of the worshippers there, together with independent persons outside, joined to build a new house of worship here; and, in the October of 1822, the corner-stone of this edifice was laid. Good men and true did the labor, and did it well. Like their own characters, the product was substantial and honest, more commodious and handsome within than showy or ornamental without. It stands the tests of use and time: the foundations have not sprung, the walls have not bulged, the dome has not cracked. Sound and faithful men were they. If I should call over the list of their names, all who remember them would say, "They were workmen who needed not to be ashamed." Well, their building is all done now. They rest from their labors, and their works do follow them.

In May, 1823, the church was dedicated; and, on the same day, the Rev. Paul Dean was installed as the minister. The legal title by which the congregation was incorporated was the Central Universalist Society. Of the ninety-two names which appear on the record of original proprietors, only two remain on our roll; and of all the persons who worshipped in this church when it was first opened, thirty-eight years ago, there are barely six with us now. What an example of our

American instability! What a striking lesson of that rapid shifting of habits and residences which characterizes the New England of our day! Like nomads, pitching and furling their tents in a social wilderness, we seem, rather than like citizens housed in a chronic civilization. Time was, when whole generations grew up, lived, and died under one roof-tree, about one ancestral hearth, seeing the same pictures on the same venerable walls, swinging on the same well-sweep, the same old trees beneath which they played in childhood flinging a shadow on their marble brows borne out to burial. But all that is altered now. No man lives in his father's house, and lingers pensively where his mother sat at evening to read her Bible. Each man now dwells, in the course of his life, in a dozen or twenty houses; and his children are never acquainted with a sacred old home, but only with a succession of new boarding-houses. In this swift and loose roaming, let us beware lest we lose the substance with the form of home-affections, — those local attachments and sacred associations through which the heart roots itself, and the inner soul of us is held anchored in still havens, however wildly and far the passions and the fancies may toss and drift.

The first pastor of this society was a man of marked gifts and graces, — a face and person of uncommon beauty; a musical, manly voice; great fluency of language, and dignified ease of manners; a radiant smile, which drew every beholder; complete perspicuity of thought and style; an unaffected fervor of piety, and a spirit of frank and winsome kindness. Under his ministrations the church soon filled up, and its prosperity continued unabated for a period of twelve years. A halcyon time.

At length, the difference between the extreme Universalists, who maintained that there was no punishment whatever in the future state for the sins of the present, and the Restorationists, who asserted that there was a limited retribution hereafter, broke into discussion, and produced a division. Mr.

Dean was one of the principal leaders of the latter party. His society, or at least the most of them, sympathizing with his views, petitioned the Legislature to change their corporate name. The term "Universalist" had come to denote, they affirmed, a believer, not merely in the ultimate restoration of all, but in no future punishment; whereas they did believe in a just retribution beyond the grave. Their petition was granted in 1838; and the name of this church was changed from "Central Universalist Society" to "The Bulfinch-street Society. That legal title it has ever since borne. It is a happy one in this respect, that it does not commit us to any doctrinal peculiarity, but leaves us freely to our individual convictions, and leaves those convictions at perfect liberty to change in correspondence with the progressive development of our minds and the increasing light of truth.

From about the year 1835, various causes had combined to effect a numerical decay in the society. Finally, this waning of attendance and of pecuniary strength reached a pitch where it was thought necessary to take steps to recruit the diminished numbers and revive the drooping energies of the congregation. Accordingly, in November, 1839, with some unhappy dissension and opposition in certain quarters, the Rev. Frederick T. Gray, previously serving with great zeal and acceptance in the Ministry at Large at the Pitts-street Chapel, was settled here as colleague-pastor. In little less than a year from that date, by amicable agreement of all parties interested, Mr. Dean resigned his office as senior pastor, and closed his ministry here of seventeen years in May, 1840.

The ministry of Paul Dean was a pleasing, effective, and honorable one. Comparatively few ministries are so happy, so forcible, or so fruitful. In his day, he was among the most favorite and prominent public speakers. Afterwards, crowds of new men, and clouds of new events rushing forward, obscured him. In his retirement, the sands of his

genial and placid old age slowly wore away. Surrounded by love and honor and grateful attentions, his sandals already glistening in the flood, he contentedly waited for the Master's shining hand to beckon him across the river. Happy will his successors be, if, when in their turn they too are jostled aside, they can lie in the hand of God with as meek a spirit, and leave behind as endeared a memory. On many a parlor-wall in this city, his benignant portrait, taken so many years agone, still hangs, often gazed on by those who fondly recall the old times, when, as they sat beneath his instructions, the world was newer and life was fairer than it can ever be again to them whose feet are so fast tending to the unknown land. Peace was with the good old man as he gradually sank away to his endless portion. His works honored him. His children's children rose up and called him blessed. The smile of God lighted his path. The hand of Christ gently led him, by still waters and through green pastures, to the Paradise where he is now for ever at home with the Father.

Under the indefatigable, many-handed administration of Mr. Gray, the empty pews at once began to be filled, and the enfeebled church to put on robustness. Ere long, the Sunday school ran over, the communion-table was thronged, the conference-room was full and zealous, the congregation crowded the church all day, and every avenue of the society was pervaded with life, heart, and joy. This tidal prosperity poured on at high flood for ten years. No society within the Unitarian ranks, perhaps, had at that time so enviable a fame for social union, religious fervor, general warmth, heartiness, and activity. This, with the sole abatement that he was surrounded by a band of zealous and effective co-workers, was to be attributed directly to the unwearied assiduity of the pastor, whose uncommon gifts of ready sympathy and religious unction, brought into faithful exercise in incessant visiting among the sick, the poor, the lonely, more than compensated for any possible lack of brilliant qualities in the pulpit. His sermon-

izing, too, from its simplicity, its concrete, hortatory character, especially from its evangelical vitality and savor, was very effective over a large class. But, above all, his ejaculatory warmth of manner, his fervid grasp of the hand, his moistening eye and tremulous lip, and impulsive expressions of interest in those who came under his charge, gave him a rare hold upon their feelings. This dome has often echoed to the earnestness of his adjurations. Yonder vestry has often been hushed to the solemnity of his prayers. Hundreds will bear to their dying day indelible impressions from addresses they have heard him make. Verily, in those years he was a pastor who bore his people in his heart; an evangelist, in whose conscience Christ was enthroned.

But the brightest day comes to an end; the fruition of the happiest enterprise will terminate at last. About 1850, this springtide of combined numerical and religious prosperity, which you had so long been enjoying, commenced an ebb. That great exodus, which had then fairly begun, of our city residents moving to suburban villages opened to convenience of access by the railroads in every direction, — that exodus which has not ceased since, — made its shattering influence tell steadily on this as on the surrounding churches. From that time a constant draining and diminution of power went disastrously on.

In 1853, Mr. Gray went to California to take temporary charge of the new Unitarian Church in San Francisco. During his absence on this trying expedition, the Rev. Calvin Lincoln, an able and most consecrated minister of Christ, whose sweet charm of spirit and address, whose exemplary attention to every parochial duty, and whose faithful preaching, deservedly made him a universal favorite, occupied, to the high acceptance of all, the post thus left. But in consequence of the unsettledness of every thing, the rapid shifting of the population around, the large number of churches with vacant pews in the neighborhood, — notwithstanding the scru-

pulousness of Mr. Lincoln's labors and the attractions of his ministry, — the society gained nothing, but rather continued to fall away, during that year.

Mr Gray returned in 1854. But, during his absence of fourteen months, many changes had taken place. He came back to his people in impaired health, with many cares, in depressed spirits; and he found not all as it was before. A certain distance and coolness had sprung up in some quarters, though many rallied around him with the endearing cordiality of the early time. But the old charm was never fully restored. Something seemed to be wrong somewhere. He had an affectionate heart, and sorrow entered it. He continued for a few months to toil on as well as he could. Under these circumstances, he received an invitation to fill a very important post in a field of labor most congenial to his tastes, best fitted to his talents, — the office of General Secretary of the Sunday-school Society. It seemed to be a providential call, and he accepted it; and therewith resigned the pastorship of this church in October, 1854, after a laborious and signal service of fifteen years.

Ah! how little thought he, or any one else, on that Sunday as he left this desk without a farewell word and passed through yonder door, that he would never enter these walls again! He did not purpose it so. I saw him, not a great while after, lying on his couch, when you had just invited me to become his successor. He said, with great feeling, that he had experienced a thousand kindnesses and satisfactions among you; that you were a warm-hearted and good people. And then he urged me to accept your call; adding, that he should hope often to visit his old friends in the future, and to stand often in his wonted pulpit, and speak to them. God ordered it better than he had thought. He lingered not long in pain, but calmly fell asleep, saying, "There is no valley nor shadow to death: Jesus walks before me, and the way is all bright and even."

He did the work of an evangelist. His well-deserved eulogy is to be read in the fact, that he had the genius to make himself loved by a multitude of people as a minister is rarely loved. It is also spoken by the great company, dead and living, whose distresses his bounty alleviated, whose sorrows his sympathy comforted, whose sins and follies his counselling exhortations warned, whose wavering souls his precept and example helped to guide towards heaven. In many of your houses, his breathing features almost seem to speak as you turn towards them; and hardly a day goes by without something to remind you of him in the old familiar ways. Under the yearly changes of the landscape in quiet Auburn he sleeps well, where no mortal grief can come, nor any hostile tongue disturb him more. The chosen utterance of his faith, "I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE," is written on the open leaf of the marble Bible that marks his humble mound. If he have an enemy on earth, let his relenting heart go there, and be filled with better thoughts. There let the love of all who yet hold him dear revert, to follow his ascended spirit into the joy of God; and so long as these walls stand, and worshippers gather within them, never may there be wanting a sympathetic voice to speak a memorial word of the first and second ministers of the Bulfinch-street Society!

What remains of our historic sketch may be rapidly despatched. On the first Sunday in January, 1855, I became your third minister in lineal succession. In consequence of the gradual reduction of your numbers, and of your consequent income, during the preceding five years, and in consequence of the simultaneous withdrawal of quite a large number of families upon the acceptance of Mr. Gray's resignation, — families who peremptorily left never to return, — the society was then, as many of you doubtless remember, in a very depressed condition both in point of finances and of attendance.

Well, six years and upwards have gone; and does not

the truth tell a pretty good story for us? In spite of the discouraging obstacles we have been obliged to encounter, — the premature deserters from the field, the lukewarm friends in the ranks, the almost countless removals of residence to an impracticable distance from us, the very large number of churches in this part of the city, — seventeen for a population not more than twice as large as it was when there were but two, — notwithstanding these drawbacks to our life, we have gained in numbers unto this day; and, to keep pace with the increased expenses, our annual income for the past four years has been much greater than it ever was before. We have been happy together. Our sewing-circle has sustained itself, and done much good work; our Sunday school flourishes vigorously; and in various other ways, which I need not pause to specify singly, we have shown signs of social and religious vitality.

Only one burden has hampered us at all in our corporate capacity, — that is, the debt which we inherited from those who went before us in the management of the pecuniary affairs of the society. Three thousand dollars of the original cost of the building were never paid, — the bad germ of the present load. Ten years later, temporary deficiencies in the receipts had swelled the three thousand to six. Two years afterwards, the purchase of an organ increased it to eight thousand and four hundred. Some ten years later still, in consequence of the vexatious and lamentable litigation resulting from the struggle of certain parties to get control of the church, either for the purpose of selling it or of changing its administration to different auspices, a new indebtedness of three thousand and six hundred was incurred. From that time, nothing has been added to it; but in 1852 the different sums constituting the debt were consolidated in one mortgage of twelve thousand dollars, under which disagreeable encumbrance we find ourselves to-day. Were this burden removed, and the amount its tax annually imposes

appropriated to the legitimate aims of the society, it would relieve us of our worst impediment to parochial strength, and start us on a rejoicing career. Of course, it is no moment now to think of endeavoring to wipe this standing blot from our record, — now that so many of the channels of remunerative industry are blocked, and the pecuniary aspects of the time are so disastrous: but it *is* a time, none the less, to survey the position of our Zion, and learn what she requires at our hands; to warm our zeal in common for her interests, and interchange fresh promises to be severally faithful to our duties as worshippers within her gates. In conclusion, then, let us briefly see how we stand, and what we ought to do.

We have a commodious and pleasant church, in a still situation, easily accessible. Of the seventeen societies in this part of the city, we are the oldest, except two. Under those unfavorable circumstances which have made many of our sister congregations diminish heavily, we have persistently increased, and are more numerous now than at any previous time for ten years. There is no root of bitterness, no subject of contention whatever, among us. We are attached to each other, and we feel at home here as nowhere else. Still, because of our financial weakness, and the continual removals of our fellow-worshippers from the neighborhood and from the city, your pastor, and those few of the society who really take an active interest in its concerns, suffer a constant anxiety lest our numbers be not kept good, and lest our accounts drift into arrears. Obviously this uneasiness must be as painful to him and them as it is prejudicial to the spiritual life and improvement, the moral energy and fruitfulness, of the church. What, now, shall we do?

To-morrow, pursuant to the notice already given from this desk, the thirty-eighth annual meeting of the parish will be held. Let there be a full attendance of the proprietors, and let there be resolute and unanimous action for the support of the church and its services during the next year, in a spirit

worthy of our faith and of our privileges. Then let every man and woman who belongs with us feel a personal responsibility to co-operate with the pastor and the society-officers in building up our congregational prosperity. We wish to see the earnest and punctual presence of the whole congregation at every Sunday service. We wish to see every seat now vacant occupied by a regular attendant. Leave not the task of accomplishing this to a few who will struggle in vain to achieve it. Let every one but do his part heartily, showing something of that intelligent zeal and tenacious devotedness to the welfare of his chosen Zion that he is accustomed to show in the furtherance of his own enterprises, and the result will be prompt and satisfactory.

Parishioners and friends, solemn hours are rolling over us, — hours in which fate is woven. But let us remember, while the imminent national crisis is fastening our attention, and demanding private sacrifices for the public weal, that this is no reason why we should permit those domestic institutions which have made our dear New England what she is to languish. No: while the love of country is rushing hotly through every vein, let the love of God accompany it in equal volume. When war broods over us with eyes full of flame, and talons full of thunderbolts; when the enemies of our rightful government and of the equal liberties of man are marching on our Capitol, — all the more should we sustain a pulpit dedicated to a pure religion and a philanthropic morality; a religion which, without offensive pertinacity or cant, has ever stood for justice, loyalty, and liberty, uncompromisingly promulgating the principles that become Christian patriots and American freemen. Patriotism and piety, whether in the ancient time or the modern, are not alien, but closely akin, — hand in hand entering the place of prayer, hand in hand going up to the field of battle. While we support the Constitution, then, let us also maintain the Altar; lavishing our labor and treasure to garnish and crowd the courts

of the church, where penitence and forgiveness embrace b
neath the peaceful benediction of God, as freely as we a
willing to lavish our blood to defend the government who
ensign shall yet wave triumphant around the whole Unio
when every State has been restored, and every traitor ha
tasted his doom. So the pious and patriotic architects o
Jerusalem builded, having their swords girded at their sides
and every man with one of his hands wrought in the work
and with the other hand held a weapon. May God, and th
wisdom and valor of faithful men, defeat the purposes of th
wicked, and gloriously save our country! May God, and ou
own co-operative piety and diligence, raise this society t
overflow, and make it a happy and fruitful Zion for us and
our children! "And whatsoever more shall be needful fo
the house of thy God, which thou shalt have occasion to be-
stow, bestow it."